

## HEMISPHERE FOCUS

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**Mexican Governors and Mayors Place Ex-Military in Public Safety Posts***By George W. Grayson***OVERVIEW**

- The inability of federal and local police to curb powerful drug cartels has forced President Felipe Calderón to emphasize the role of the armed forces in Mexico's counternarcotics efforts.
- More than a dozen governors and big-city mayors have replaced civilians with retired military personnel in key public security posts.
- The former officers may be more adept at cooperating with their active duty counterparts against drug cartels.
- These generals-turned-gendarmes have become a target of narco-traffickers, who are eager to demonstrate that they can act with impunity no matter who commands state and local law enforcement agencies.
- Despite the cartels' murders of--and moves to suborn officers--the military will play an increasingly large role in Mexico's battle against criminal syndicates.

**Introduction**

The government of Felipe Calderón has increasingly relied on the military to conduct operations against the major cartels that threaten citizen security. Since taking office on December 1, 2006, Calderón has deployed upward of 30,000 army and navy personnel to fight criminal organizations. His reliance on the armed forces springs from the fact that the cartels have overwhelmed Mexican police forces--weakened by corruption and lack of professionalism—at the federal, state, and local level. Especially in smaller communities, policemen are also extremely vulnerable to attacks and blackmail by ruthless underworld gangs.

Nine groups constitute the major targets of Mexico's counterdrug efforts: (1) the Gulf Cartel, centered in Tamaulipas; (2) Los Zetas, once a paramilitary arm of the Gulf Cartel but increasingly an independent force, which is diversifying its activities and areas of operation; (3) the Sinaloa Cartel headed by the notorious Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera; (4) the Beltrán Leyva brothers, Sinaloans who broke with El Chapo and now dominate Guerrero and the Mexico City airport; (5) the Juárez

Cartel; (6) the fragmented Arellano Félix Organization concentrated in Tijuana and other cities of Baja California; (7) the Milenio Cartel, an ally of the Sinaloans focused in Michoacán; (8) the debilitated Oaxaca Cartel concentrated in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec where Los Zetas have emerged; and (9) "La Familia Michoacana." The last grouping, also known as La Familia, is a heterogeneous force embracing some religious fanatics, which began as vigilantes to prevent Los Zetas from gaining a beachhead in Michoacán. This state is home to Lázaro Cárdenas, the nation's largest port and an open sesame for cocaine as well as imports of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, precursor chemicals for the manufacture of methamphetamine in local super-labs.

As noted in Table 1, the number of drug-related murders has soared in recent years. Although Chihuahua (1,652), Sinaloa (686), Baja California (617), Mexico State (360), Guerrero (294), and Michoacán (233) suffered the most executions in 2008, no state escaped the ever-more grisly narcoviolence last year.

**Table 1: Murders in Mexico, 2001–Early 2009**

Year	Number of Murders
2009	2,004 (through May 1)
2008	5,207
2007	2,275
2006	2,120
2005	1,537
2004	1,304
2003	1,365
2002	No consistent figures found
2001	1,080

Source: “Aumentan 47% ejecuciones: PGR,” *Terra*, May 24, 2008 [www.terra.com.mx/articulo.aspx?articuloId=668105](http://www.terra.com.mx/articulo.aspx?articuloId=668105); James C. McKinley Jr. “With Beheadings and Attacks, Drug Gangs Terrorize Mexico,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2006; and the newspaper *Reforma*, which publishes a weekly “*Ejecutómetro*” of murders in its “National” section.

### Appointment of Military Men to State and Municipal Public Safety Posts

State and local law enforcement agencies are more likely to be suborned than their national counterparts. Thus, governors and mayors are following the chief executive’s example in relying on ex-military officials to hold senior public safety posts in their administrations. States and major cities that follow this practice appear in Table 2.

**Table 2: States and Municipalities with Military Men in Senior Public Safety Posts**

State/Municipality	Position	Incumbent	Date Appointed
Acapulco (Guerrero)	Director of Municipal Traffic and Protection	Brig. General Serafín Valdez Martínez (Ret.)	Jan. 2, 2009
Aguascalientes	Secretary of Public Security	Div. General Rolando Eugenio Hidalgo Heddy; former commander of IX Military Zone headquartered in Culiacán; and ex-head of GAFES	Oct. 6, 2008
Baja California	Director of State Ministerial Police	Brig. General Florencio Raúl Cuevas Salgado; former commander of II Military Zone headquartered in Tijuana	March 27, 2008
	Director of State Preventative Police	Lt. Col. Eusebio Alecio Villatoro Cortez (Ret.)	Feb. 20, 2009
Ciudad Juárez	Director of Public Security	Div. General Julián David Rivera Bretón (Ret.)	March 16, 2009
	Director of Security Operations	Col. Alfonso Cristóbal García Melgar (Ret.)	March 16, 2009
Coahuila	Director of	Brig. General Jesús	Aug. 12, 2008

Coahuila	Ministerial Police Undersecretary of Prevention and Social Readaptation	Ernesto Estrada Bustamante (Ret.) General José Luis García Dorantes	Feb. 24, 2009
Gómez Palacio (Durango)	Director of Municipal Public Security	Lt. Col. Antonio Horacio Ramírez Morales (Ret.)	Feb. 14, 2008
Guerrero	Secretary of Public Security	Div. General Juan Heriberto Salinas Altés (Ret.), former army chief of staff.	April 1, 2005
Morelos	General Coordinator of the State College of Public Security	Brig. General Héctor Andrés Alvizu Hernández (Ret.)	April 22, 2008
Oaxaca	Secretary of Citizen Protection	Lt. Col. Javier Rueda Velásquez (Ret.)	March 31, 2008
Puebla	Secretary of Public Security	Div. General Mario Ayón Rodríguez (Ret.); former director-general of personnel for the Defense Ministry	March 1, 2005
Saltillo (Coahuila)	Director General of the Municipal Preventative Police	Brig. General Marco Antonio Delgado Talavera (Ret.)	Jan. 29, 2009
Tabasco	Acting Secretary of Public Security	Mayor Sergio López Uribe (Ret.)	Feb. 1, 2009
Tijuana (Baja California)	Municipal Secretary of Public Security	Lt. Col. Julián Leyzaola Pérez (Ret.)	Dec. 2, 2008
Tlaxcala	Secretary of Public Security	Div. General José Leopoldo Martínez González (Ret.)	Jan. 1, 2009
Veracruz	Secretary of Public Security	Div. General Sergio López Esquer; former zone commander for states of Coahuila, Baja California, Baja California Sur, and Veracruz	July 1, 2008

Source: Jéssica Zermeño, “Toman generales mandos policiacos,” *Reforma* (Mexico), February 15, 2009; Jéssica Zermeño et al., “Optan estados por mando militar,” *Reforma*, February 15, 2009; and “Encabezan los hermanos Ayón Rodríguez mandos policíacos en el país,” E-consulta, February 15, 2009.

Although by no means new to Mexico, this approach offers several advantages. First, many of the officers selected have served as regional or zonal commanders and have years of experience combating the drug mafias.

Second, they are likely to have ties to—and the confidence of—current regional and zonal military chiefs with whom they often coordinate action against the cartels.

Third, whether retired or on leave, military officers may be familiar with the tactics of Los Zetas, the original contingent of which had served in the Mexican Army’s elite Airborne Special Forces Groups (GAFES). In fact,

General Rolando Eugenio Hidalgo Heddy, public security secretary in Aguascalientes, headed these commandos. Although originally recruited by the Gulf Cartel, the especially violent Los Zetas have begun to move out of their strongholds along the U.S.-Mexican border—with a current presence in Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Mexico State, Hidalgo, and Mexico City.

Fourth, generals, admirals, and colonels have the background to bring a culture of discipline to civilian forces that have often acted in a venal, free-wheeling manner—to the point that thousands of serious kidnappings and other felonies allegedly go unreported because many citizens believe that the cops are in league with the miscreants. Even if unable to change behavioral patterns, military leaders can oust incompetents and malefactors. For instance, General Salinas Altes removed 200 elements of Acapulco's municipal preventive police when he took over as Guerrero state's security boss.<sup>1</sup>

Fifth, officers are in a good position to recruit active duty or retired members of the armed forces as policemen in the jurisdictions that they serve.

Finally, every public opinion survey shows that military men enjoy a much better reputation than do the police. Of course, plaudits arise largely from their efforts in disaster relief rather than their anticrime work.

### The Other Side of the Coin

These factors must be weighed against the different professional preparation of army and navy personnel vis-à-vis civilian policemen. The former are trained to employ force to subdue an enemy. While encouraged to acquire diplomatic skills, military action is emphasized. In contrast, good cops, like elected officials, seek to negotiate with average citizens who are angry or agitated, attempting to resolve disputes through conciliation rather than resorting to physical or armed force. As [Carlos Luken](#), a Mexico-based businessman and consultant, astutely observed:<sup>2</sup>

A soldier is trained to fight, kill and be victorious. When a good soldier does his job, he uses tactics and strategies, not rights and negotiation. People get hurt. A politician is trained to buy time for argument, concession and to seek accommodation. Their methods are totally different. It is

<sup>1</sup> "Reconocen corrupción policíaca en Guerrero," *El Porvenir* (Mexico), March 17, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Luken, "Politics versus the Mexican Military's War against Crime," *Mexicdata.info*, August 11, 2008, <http://mexidata.info/id1936.html>.

a colossal error to have one and ask him to behave like the other. Doing so is not only fruitless and confusing, but dangerous as it eventually pits them against each other. In the short outcome the rules of engagement eventually overrun the rules of order, while in the long run both lose.

The growing dependence on the military to carry out public safety functions has impelled an upswing in charges of human rights violations, particularly in areas where the armed forces have carried out anti-drug missions. Since Calderón's inauguration, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission has received 1,230 accusations of abuses by the military, while the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, A.C., has recorded 120 complaints.<sup>3</sup>

Then, there is the danger that these men face. Los Zetas, in particular, have homed in on military personnel. They are believed to have decapitated eight army officers and enlisted men in Guerrero in December 2008. After this tragedy, the mayor of Chilpancingo Guerrero, Héctor Astudillo Bello, sought closer collaboration with the local zonal commander concerning security issues.<sup>4</sup>

Criminals are accused of torturing retired Brigadier General Mauro Enrique Tello Quiñones before driving him into the jungle and executing him with a shot to the head. His corpse and those of two aides were discovered on February 3, 2009, two days after the mayor of Cancún had hired Tello Quiñones to form a swat team to fight criminals in the resort city, which attracted 18 million visitors last year.<sup>5</sup>

City authorities are now seeking another retired officer to replace Tello Quiñones.

Tabasco's governor Andrés Granier Melo has had trouble keeping military safety chiefs because of threats from the underworld. Retired Major Sergio López Uribe is the fourth ex-member of the armed forces to function as the state's secretary of public security.<sup>6</sup>

Ciudad Juárez's police chief, retired Major Roberto Orduña Cruz, stepped down on February 20, 2009, after several officers were slain during the week, and the killers posted handwritten signs saying a policeman would be executed every 48 hours until he resigned. More than 1,350 people

<sup>3</sup> Centro de Derechos Humanos Prodh, "La Justicia militar propicia impunidad," *Boletín de Prensa*, March 9, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Jesús Guerrero, "Prevén pedir colaboración a ejército," *Reforma* (Mexico), January 3, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> William Booth, "Warrior in Drug Fight Soon Becomes a Victim," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> His predecessors were retired generals Francisco Fernández Solís (Jan. 1, 2007–June 30, 2007), Alberto Espinoza Ramírez (June 30, 2007–Feb. 6, 2008), and Héctor Sánchez Gutiérrez (Feb. 6, 2008–Dec. 22, 2008).

died in Ciudad Juárez last year in violence that included the murder of more than 60 police officers. The mayor replaced Orduña Cruz with another retired general, Julián David Rivera Bretón.

Even bodyguards of the governor of Chihuahua, the state where Ciudad Juárez is located, suffered an attack on February 22 in which one escort died and two were seriously wounded. The state's death toll reached 437 during the first eleven weeks of 2009, although the murder rate plummeted after the Calderón administration dispatched 700 federal police and 3,200 additional army troops—the so-called “green tsunami”—to the border city in early March. Killings among inmates have even led the military to take control of the city's two prisons.

Inserting military personnel into sensitive posts can also expose them to corruption. On January 17, 2009, Chiapas governor Juan Sabines removed retired Brigadier General Marco Esteban Juárez Escalera as director of state police because of his alleged involvement in illegal activities.

Such actions have not prevented mayors from working with the National Defense Ministry to recruit military policemen as law enforcement officers in their cities. Ciudad Juárez alone is seeking to attract 500 to 1,000 soldiers, offering a salary of 9,800 pesos per month (\$726) compared with their current pay of 3,600 pesos (\$267).<sup>7</sup>

Private companies are also making offers to members of the armed forces who could provide security to individuals and businesses.

## Conclusion

While security in some Mexican cities like Ciudad Juárez has come under severe stress, Mexico is far from becoming a failed state as some Cassandras claim, and President Calderón is valiantly confronting the problem of drug violence as evidenced by the muscular strikes against the cartels and the hefty rewards recently offered for the capture of 37 top capos. Washington can lend a helping hand not only by dispensing resources from the Mérida Initiative but also by seeking to stanch the illegal southbound flow of weapons, including the military-grade arms favored by Mexico's underworld.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Pedro Torres, “Reclutará el municipio soldados como policías,” *El Diario* (Ciudad Juárez), August 20, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> That 90 percent of weapons used by Mexican cartels come from the United States applies only to arms that the Calderón government has sent to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and that can be tracked down; see “Obama Claims 90 Percent of Guns Recovered in Mexico Come from U.S.,” *The Truth-O-Meter*, *St. Petersburg Times*, April 16, 2009 [www.politifact.com](http://www.politifact.com).

Nevertheless, there are areas where the drug cartels strongly challenge legitimate authority, exemplified by Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez and other border cities, the drug-producing “golden triangle,” where Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua intersect, and the “tierra caliente” that embraces portions of Michoacán, Guerrero, and Mexico State. In these areas, elected governments are under strong pressure from the illegal activities of criminal gangs.

The weakness of police forces will find military men leading the government's crusade against the drug cartels, while even more of their counterparts who have traded khaki for mufti will carry out law enforcement responsibilities in states and municipalities.

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